Theresa Williams November 1, 2010

Words can have a huge emotional impact on people, and often affect their self-image and self-worth. A few years ago I worked at an establishment that helps the disabled community. I was a secretary surrounded by doctors, psychiatrists, therapists and patients with mental and physical disabilities. I had heard the “r” word before at school or with my peers, but I was shocked when I heard adults, even doctors, use that word. The use of the “r” word stems from the misrepresentation of the medical term, mental retardation, which signifies cognitive deficit. Families and patients experience this as a form of oppression. When slang vocabulary or derogatory terms for certain groups of people are used the impact is often not considered. Continued use of this word also affects the way the public views people with disabilities; the negative connotations associated with this word can hinder the social, political, and economic advancement of people with disabilities.

Mental retardation is a medical term meaning cognitive limitations; it is determined by tests for measuring intelligence quotient (I.Q). It is representative of a segment of the population, which falls below a normative range. ‘Retard’ has become a common slang word for stupid or slow, which unconsciously links the disabled community to a lower class system. Cultural changes continually affect the English language, which in turn affects society. The “r” word became a distorted, depreciatory word stemming from the medical term mental retardation. The public doesn’t realize how offensive and harmful the use of the “r” word really is. The lack of empathy and knowledge about this word can have painful affects on the disabled community. Many people use the “r” word as a joke. The lasting effect of this perception creates a separation of the population. The slang definition is always linked to the true medical definition, which creates an unequal class system and portrays the disabled community as inferior. When this term is used in the medical context, it is defined as pathological, as a disorder, making the person with mental retardation a patient rather than a contributing member of society. The “r” word reinforces this by defining people with mental retardation as those who have afflictions and require additional assistance, rather than equals. Many people associated with the disabled population have expressed that the use of this word is a form of oppression.

In “Reassigning Meaning”, Simi Linton discusses the impact of medical definitions and language in general on the disabled population. Definitions of disability strongly affect the social perspective on how to identify and connect with people with disabilities. The “r” word has a very negative subtext even when used “lightheartedly,” which affects the public’s views. This derogatory term creates a stigma for people with disabilities and can result in social isolation. Linton asserts that the disabled population should have a say in what they are called and how they are defined. The fact that the “r” word is still openly used diminishes the disabled communities voice and autonomy in society.

Both Simi Linton and James Charlton discuss a hierarchical perspective that places the disabled population at a disadvantage and concurrently devalues their position and contribution to society. James Charlton contends that the oppression of the disabled community is due to the dominant society’s inaccurate beliefs, which relates to Linton’s theory in that she believes the medical community is forcing their definition of disability on society; this greatly affects the social perspective of people with disabilities. The use of the “r” word reflects these ideas by reinforcing the perspective that the disabled population is of lower value in society. The “r” word separates a whole segment of society, impacting both the public’s views of people with disabilities and their expectations for them. This disparaging word creates a negative self-image in those with disabilities and may foment a belief that disability means inability. Linton states that the disabled public should have a say in what language is used to describe them. The “r” word demeans and diminishes the role of the disabled community and suppresses their opportunities to be seen as equal. People with disabilities do not have the same ability to progress in their personal and social lives, which belies any notion of fairness or equality.

The frequent use of the “r” word has desensitized the public to understanding the emotional implications and forced the disabled community into an undervalued and ignored class. The public doesn’t believe they are hurting anyone when they use the “r” word. Some people believe that it’s not an offensive term if they are not saying it about a disabled person, however to the disabled community and their families the “r” word is always offensive, in any context. Liane Carter, an activist and mother of a disabled child, believes the “r” word is extremely hateful. She states that the use of the “r” word in any joke “…reinforces the discrimination and intolerance children like mine face daily.” (Carter). Any attempt to use this word to label something as “less than” or incompetent is demeaning. Many activists have argued for the complete abandonment of this word because it emotionally hurts them and degrades an entire segment of society. It is almost impossible to erase a word from the English language; people don’t want to change their vocabulary or stop using certain terms especially if they believe there are no consequences to doing it.

The emotional implications of the use of derogatory words are more profound than the public realizes. James Charlton discusses how oppression of the disabled community creates a false consciousness. “The dehumanization of people with disabilities through language has a profound influence on consciousness” (Charlton 157). The “r” word produces a feeling of self-pity and shame for people with disabilities, and prevents them from understanding their capabilities and roles in society. This humiliating and degrading word is an unconscious form of oppression. The use of this word makes people with disabilities believe they are less capable and less important than the “able-bodied” public.

The use of the “r” word takes personal control away from people with disabilities. Everyone has the right to decide how and what he or she should be named. Many national and local protests have been held to raise awareness of the effects of the “r” word. A newsletter by self-advocates in the central New York region called “The Power of Our Voices” discusses a movement to stop the use of the “r” word. Activists try to raise the consciousness of society about the dehumanizing effects of this derogatory word. This newsletter states, “The word retarded, especially when used as a put down, robs people with development disabilities of their dignity.” (“The Power of Our Voices” 5-7). People with disabilities want to be respected and treated as equals. Activists and people with disabilities are asking for more acceptance for people with intellectual and developmental limitations. Syracuse University held a walk for “Disability Day” to help the disabled community to tell the world that they deserve respect and fairness in their lives. Ending the use of the “r” word will help change the public’s attitudes and reverse the disparaging stigma that negatively affects so many lives of people with disabilities.

The “r” word will most likely never go away and it always will signify a negative comment; however if the medical reference to mental retardation is stopped then maybe the disabled community will have a chance to separate from the slang definition of it. The government is changing the names of institutions to attempt to expunge the use of the “r” word. Recently the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities has been changed to the Office of People with Disabilities. Progress is slowly being made to discourage the use of the “r” word. The national organization known as ARC has removed its previous acronym of Association for Retarded Citizens and is only know as arc. The use of this as slang may never go away. However if we can stop using “mental retardation” maybe the linkage between the derogatory word and the medical definition will be broken. This can allow the disabled community to distance themselves from that definition and create their own.

People who don’t believe the “r” word is inappropriate don’t pay attention to the exponential effects of it. The disabled community is emotionally scarred and humiliated. By forcing an unwanted designation on a segment of the population tells them that they are inferior. The developmentally disabled community deserves the right to define themselves. The “r” word degrades and dehumanizes people with disabilities. According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, the “r” word, no matter how it is used “still is perpetuating the negative stereotypes associated with intellectual disabilities and works to further stigmatize and demean those individuals with intellectual disabilities as well as their families, friends, and advocates.” (Siperstein). The “r” word alters the public’s view of people with disabilities due to the damaging connotations associated with it. This word puts down an entire segment of the population and unnecessarily alienates people with disabilities.

The “r” word is used in a variety of situations; some people think it is not offensive in some contexts, such as humor. This exemplifies the fact that people will use a term that represents a whole segment of the population with cognitive disabilities in a pejorative way, without considering the consequences of such words. The use of the “r” word has become pervasive in our society; it is used in a cavalier manner often to denote humor. Its use reflects and reinforces societies perspectives that people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities are incapable of autonomous function. The impact of this construct is that it demeans an entire segment of people and creates a hostile environment for them to live and thrive. It is my hope that changing perspective by changing language and valuing all people for who they are can create positive and fulfilling possibilities for everyone regardless of their differences.

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